DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 402 SO 025 148

AUTHOR Bretherton, Di; And Others
TITLE Conflict Resolution in Children. Peace Education Miniprints No. 72.
INSTITUTION Lund Univ. (Sweden). Malmo School of Education.
REPORT NO ISSN-1101-6418
PUB DATE Jan 95
NOTE 18p.
AVAILABLE FROM R&D Group, Preparedness for Peace, School of Education, Box 23501, S-200 45 Malmo, Sweden.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *After School Programs; Conflict; *Conflict Resolution; Decision Making; Elementary Secondary Education; Extended School Day; Foreign Countries; Interpersonal Communication; *Peace; Problem Solving; Secondary School Students; Social Control
IDENTIFIERS *Peace Education

ABSTRACT

As concern with the level of violence in society increases, this document suggests one approach to reducing violence is to develop nonviolent conflict resolution programs to provide people with the skills to solve problems collaboratively. These programs also may encourage people to refocus the way they experience conflict in their lives. They teach that conflict is a necessary component for growth and can lead to shared understandings, when dealt with in a positive way. This paper considers two programs that help adults teach conflict resolution skills to children. "Dealing with Conflict" is a 10 week course for adolescents that is normally run in a classroom setting. "Afters" is a program for younger children that is designed for after school care settings. (RJC)

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Peace Education Miniprints
No. 72
January 1995

ED 386 402

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Di Bretherton
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CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN CHILDREN

Di Bretherton
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There is increasing concern with the level of violence in our society. One approach to reducing violence is to develop nonviolent conflict resolution programs to provide people with the skills to solve problems collaboratively. These programs may also encourage people to refocus the way they experience conflict in their lives. They teach that conflict is a necessary component for growth and can lead to shared understandings, when dealt with in a positive way. In this paper two programs are considered which help adults teach conflict resolution skills to children. "Dealing with Conflict" is a ten week course for adolescents that is normally run in a classroom setting. "Afters" is a program for younger children which is designed for after school care settings.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN CHILDREN

Di Bretherton, Linda Maree Collins & Andrea Allard
Department of Psychology
University of Melbourne
Parkville, Victoria 3052
Australia

Concern about the Level of Violence

There is increasing concern with the level of violence in our community. Within Australia National and State committees have been established to investigate the dimensions and causes of violence. Mugford (1989) notes "There are devastating consequences of violence to individuals and their families in terms of their physical and psychological health...The implications for health, welfare and criminal justice provision are staggering. In 1986-1987 refuge funding in Australia cost $27.6 million and this is the tip of the iceberg." (p. 4). The National Committee Against Violence estimated that one homicide costs the Australian Community a million dollars, money that could be better spent on other things.

One approach to reducing violence is to develop nonviolent conflict resolution programs to provide people with the skills to solve problems collaboratively and cooperatively. These programs also encourage people to refocus the way they experience conflict in their lives. They teach that conflict is a necessary component for growth and can lead to shared understandings, when dealt with in a positive way.

The case for teaching young children conflict resolution skills seems obvious. However, it can be argued that if such programs do not consider the root causes of violence then their impact will not be deep or lasting. Also, there may be a gap between what adults think they are teaching and what children are actually learning. In this paper we will consider two programs which help adults teach conflict resolution skills to children. *Dealing with Conflict* is a 10 week course for adolescents that is normally run in a classroom setting. *Afters* is a program for younger children which is designed for after school care settings.

Growing Up to be Violent

A number of researchers accept that attitudes toward conflict and the skills we acquire in resolving it, are initially learnt at home. The family is the forum in which most people learn how to communicate, solve problems and work co-operatively. Eron (1982) found in terms of interaction between parent and child, those parents who punish their children physically and express dissatisfaction with their accomplishments and characteristics, have the most aggressive children.

Within the family the idea of separate sex roles is established (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Early in life, children are discriminated by social cues such as their clothing and name. While adults attribute different treatment to the needs of the child, a baby dressed in pink and called Jane elicits different behaviours from caregivers than the same baby dressed in blue and called Tim. Boys are discouraged from expressing vulnerability while girls are constantly reminded of their dependence in small ways. For example, fastening on clothing for children is more often at the front for boys, to encourage autonomy, at the back for girls, assuming the need for assistance. According to Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder and Huesmann (1977) "The literature on aggression is monotonous in the consistency with which it reports sex differences" (p. 89). Smith & Green (1974) found greater amounts of aggression (verbal and physical) expressed by boys than girls. Omark and Edelman (1975) report that male children from preschool to third grade were significantly more aggressive (hitting and pushing) than females. According to Cairns (1979) five times as many adolescent boys as girls are arrested for violent crimes (e.g., homicide, robbery, and assault). The National Committee on Violence noted that the most probable perpetrator of violence is a male aged between 18 and 30 years of age.

As the child grows, the gendered nature of behavioural differences is reinforced by television, toys, books and games. The Australian College of Paediatrics Policy Statement on Children's Television states that television has become entrenched as the most important socialising influence in Australian Culture. The causality can be seen as bidirectional. Children who are aggressive become socially isolated and watch a lot of violent television (Eron, 1982). Watching violent television reinforces and condones their aggressive attitudes and those who are already at risk are most vulnerable to the effects of television. War toys and their associated television scripts are gendered and reinforce the idea that males are active and females are passive. Action for boys is confused with violence, for example "action

man" is a military figurine, and "action movie" is a euphemism for fast and copious slaughter with special effects. Girls, on the other hand, are offered dolls to care for rather than adventure. We would argue that both boys and girls love action, colour and transformation, but that this does not have to be linked with violence.

Walker and Browne (1985) suggest sex role training that encourages girls to be passive creates a sense of helplessness. Seligman (1975) showed that animals who experienced helplessness early in life were vulnerable to helplessness later in life and hypothesized that the same principle might apply to humans. Walker and Browne (1985) conclude that: "if women are to escape violent relationships, they must overcome their tendency to helplessness by, for instance, becoming angry rather than depressed, active rather than passive and more realistic about the likelihood of the relationship continuing on its aversive course rather than improving. In doing so, they must also overcome the sex role socialisation they have been taught from early childhood" (p. 192).

The School Context

Conflict strategies that are learnt at home may be brought to school and effect the incidence of aggression in the classroom. Transfer of learning may also go from school to home. Studies of aggressive children and adolescents have shown that cognitively based treatment can lead to changes in behaviour at home, school and community and that these gains are evident up to one year later. An aggressive response may be defined as an intentional act that injures or harms another person. It involves using power to violate the legitimate rights of others and is the insistence upon expressing one's own thoughts and feelings regardless of the feelings or rights of others.

Guerra & Slaby (1988) indicate a clear difference in skills and beliefs held by male and female adolescents. They argue that boys and girls develop sex-role related cognitive standards for seeking, interpreting, and responding to aggression. Their model integrates both the internal factors (e.g., the individual's temperament or constitutional propensities) and the external factors (e.g., social events such as physical punishment) which are seen as being influenced by the developing child's cognitive resources. They found that antisocial aggressive individuals were more likely (and low aggressive individuals less likely) to solve social problems by: defining pro-

blems in hostile ways; adopting hostile goals, seek few additional facts; generate few alternative solutions and anticipating few consequences for aggression. They also found antisocial aggressive individuals were more likely to hold beliefs legitimising the use of aggression, i.e. that victims don't suffer; that aggression increases self-esteem and that victims deserve aggression.

The effect of television and popular culture on the minds of the young can be considered in the light of these cognitive mediators of aggression and violence. Material which reinforces the idea that the world is a frightening and hostile place might incline young people to a more hostile interpretation of interpersonal events. Plots which suggest that force can only be met by force justify beliefs in the legitimacy of aggression. Stories which suggest that violence is the end of the story, the solution, rather than the start of a new cycle of violence, undercut an appreciation of the need to consider the consequences and costs of using violence. The idea that there is no choice forecloses on the search for other non-violent solutions. In other words, possible harm lies not only in seeing aggression and violence modelled by heroes, but also in the message about the type of problem solving techniques that are used. A cultural ethos of machismo, the Rambo genre, tends to narrow down the options. The emphasis is on winning. The alternatives to violence and the possible costs of violent solutions are not explored. Violent television and toys promote the idea that the enemy is less than human and that force is the way to solve things. Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1990) give some tips on handling children's war play which teachers and parents find helpful.

The *Dealing With Conflict* course (Bretherton, Hooper, Hooper, Nancarrow & Sedgman, 1989) aimed to help teachers who wished to introduce conflict resolution into their classroom by compiling a curriculum. A group of people experienced in teaching conflict resolution and mediation skills to young people pooled their knowledge. The endeavour was to document the practical tried and true favourites, activities which seem to work consistently. These "grandmother's recipes" could be shared with new teachers.

The aim of the *Dealing with Conflict* program was to develop students' awareness of the causes of conflict in their lives and to build skills in the positive management of conflict. The program was designed in four steps. Step 1 involves introductory activities which build group cohesion and allow the teacher to assess the classroom climate. Step 2 describes activities that can be used to build trust, respect for one another, self-esteem and self

disclosure. Step 3 looks at the causes of conflict, the types of conflict young people experience and explores different ways of dealing with these conflicts. It introduces the concept of assertiveness as a desirable way of dealing with conflict. Step 4 details barriers to communication and ways of overcoming them using an assertive approach.

A study of the effectiveness of an intervention program evaluated the *Dealing With Conflict* course (Bretherton, Collins & Ferretti, 1989). Prior to the course males were significantly more likely than females to agree with the beliefs: that aggression increases self-esteem, helps to avoid a negative image and that victims deserve their victimisation. There was no significant difference between males and females regarding the belief that aggression is a legitimate response or that victims of aggression don't suffer. We found that the groups which received the conflict resolution training registered significantly improved scores for both problem definition and goal selection (perceived hostility). However, there was no significant change on the 5 beliefs measures as a result of doing the training. The evaluation, then, suggests that students undertaking the program became less hostile and were more able to search for creative solutions. However, the belief that aggression increases self esteem in males was not altered.

We believe there is a difference in being able and being willing to resolve conflicts nonviolently. Programs should identify and confront the internalised beliefs and attitudes of the students. These beliefs may have their roots in a culture which is socially unjust and which endorses, at the political level, the use of aggression to extend and maintain power. Social attitudes which allow groups and individuals to deny the rights of others and which condone the use violence, to maintain superiority and oppression on the basis of class, sex and race in order to preserve the imbalance of power in our society must, if the conflict resolution program is to be meaningful, be confronted.

The lesson we drew from the *Dealing with Conflict* evaluation was that it is not sufficient to give out a written curriculum, but that the adults need training. This also reflects a shift from written materials to a more active style of learning. As well the program needs to be monitored. We thought it would be interesting to work with younger groups: trainee rather than trained teachers, young children rather than adolescents. Given that the school curriculum places constraints on change, and that trainee teachers are expected to appear "in control" of the children, we decided it would be useful to shift the context of the program and place it in after school care.

The aim was to allow the trainee teachers to experience a more equal relationship with children outside the normal classroom pressures, as a preparation for using conflict resolution techniques in the classroom later in their teaching careers.

Out of school hours care is based either in schools or in community halls and differs from the classroom in that attendance is voluntary. Some child care workers believe there should not be a structured program because the children have a full day in school. Our observations in setting up the program were that spontaneous play scripts were heavily influenced by aggressive themes from popular culture and that free play situations in child care could result in vulnerable children being bullied. Child care workers informed us that as boys grew they tended to see after school care as babyish and to drift on to the streets, increasing the risk of contact with delinquent subcultures. The prevailing attitude amongst the workers seemed to be that "boys will be boys" and that aggression is natural. We decided it would be important to include child care students and workers in the program along with the teacher trainees. We also felt that gender should be a central issue, not only in the children and their relationships with each other, but also in the gendered behaviour of the adults, largely women, who care for the children.

After School Care

The *Afters* program provided the means to address gender issues through conflict resolution strategies on two levels: firstly, through working with adults and then with children. The adults were third year B.Ed. (Primary) students, and child care students who were trained over a six week period. Through a series of activities they were taught awareness of gender issues and conflict resolution skills. The facilitators then worked to develop these skills in groups of children in after school care settings. The groups were videotaped over a ten week period. The videotapes were used to give facilitators feedback about the way they ran their groups and to help them understand how their own gendered behaviour and beliefs affected their interactions with children. During this time they kept a weekly journal in which they reflected on their experiences of working with children.

The program was based on *Dealing with Conflict* but used activities suitable for younger children, such as puppet-making and plays to teach non-violent resolution of conflict and assertive communication skills, and

focussed more specifically on gender. Conflict resolution skills need to be "done" rather than just talked about, with opportunities to practise over a period of time. With young children, activities like cooking, puppet making, movement games such as Tangles and Fruit Salad work well. Other activities that facilitators listed in their journals as being successful included: The Love Tree, Chinese Whispers, Story Telling, Feeling Box, Painting & Drawing, Self Advertisement, Special Person, Freeze, Pass the Parcel, Building a Machine. (See Bond, 1989; Borba & Barba,1978; Bretherton and others,1989; Callister, Davies & Pope, 1988; Canfield & Wells, 1976; Connor, 1988; Cutting & Wilson,1992; Kreidler, 1984; Kruper, 1973; Prutzman,1978; Wilson & Hoyne, 1991 and Women Against Violence Communications, 1984 for such activities.) This fun approach was necessary in child care where a more didactic approach would be seen as inappropriate.

The assumption underlying the *Afters* program is that problem solving skills can be learnt, giving the person a range of response options to choose from in any given situation, but because aggression is culturally condoned in boys, while girls are encouraged to be submissive, the teaching of assertion to boys will differ from teaching assertion to girls. The dichotomy between 'masculine' and 'feminine' is not set in stone but must continually be learned and relearned (Clark, 1989; Davies, 1988, 1989). How 'successful' one is may be determined by others' reactions to specific behaviour and interactions. When children do 'cross over' in their behaviours, that is, move outside of what is seen as appropriate to their gender, their peers and adults often will perceive that behaviour as outside the 'norm' and in need of correction. Thus, when a girl exhibits loud, demanding behaviour, because this is not widely understood as gender appropriate, she may well be viewed as an 'aggressive' girl and treated with dismissal or disapproval. However, when similar behaviour is exhibited by a boy, this may be read as gender appropriate. Similar actions by a girl or a boy may receive dissimilar responses.

The educational goals for boys and girls were shared. For example, both boys and girls needed to learn cooperative behaviour, active listening, assertive speaking, problem-solving strategies and negotiation. However, in developing these skills with children, the adults needed to keep in mind that girls and boys, because of their gendered experiences, had different starting points. Different skills needed to be emphasised for different children. For example, many girls had already learned cooperative behaviours but needed more practise in assertively speaking about their needs. On the other hand,

boys required more work in active listening skills since many boys are not used to practising these.

Unlike many programs which address gender issues, the *Afters* program emphasised the need for girls and boys to learn and practise communication skills together. If girls learn about assertion in group with other girls, we are not teaching the boys to actively listen to the girls when they assert their needs. The conditions of assertion in a girls-only group will differ from those in a mixed group and there is no reason to assume that the skills will automatically transfer, particularly since girls tend to be ignored in mixed groups anyway. Conversely, if boys are isolated in all-boy groups the message that boys only need to listen to other boys is reinforced. Skills built and practised in the context in which they will be used tend to be applied more effectively than if they have been learned in a different context. The videotape showed that children who had learned the skills in a mixed group of boys and girls are able to use them to create more equal relationships even in the absence of adult guidance. The value of teaching these skills in mixed groups is especially relevant with primary school age children since this is the time when most boys and girls cease to play together (except in private).

The videotape was edited into a 28 minute documentary which has an accompanying booklet. The aim of the videotape is to present the information in a manner which is accessible to people working with children who would not necessarily read journal articles. This is an attempt to address the need for adults and children to work together in order to challenge the often-unquestioned gender construction of behaviour. When ideas about gender and unequal power relationships were initially introduced, a common response from many of the childcare workers and student facilitators was, "I treat every child as an individual". However, the video clearly demonstrates that some children, mainly boys, individually demanded and received far more than their fair share of the resources. Other individuals, mainly girls, sat patiently waiting, waiting, waiting for their fair share.

The videotape provided a useful means of reflecting on what was happening in the group, what worked well, what needed to be changed. For example, the videotapes indicated that when facilitators began working with the groups of children, there were some shared common misunderstandings about conflict resolution strategies. These included: facilitators confusing children's politeness with active listening; confusing being nice to the children with effective group management; insisting upon "cooperation" at the

expense of addressing conflict within the group; and confusing compliance on the part of the children with effective resolution of conflict.

On the basis of video evidence, the adults' abilities to fully utilise the conflict resolution processes and to make the links between the suggested activities and the children's skill development varied greatly. The source of this variance was not only the ability to work with children but also the ability to be open to change. Some students were more able to "see" the videotape and reflect on their own behaviour patterns than were others. The program needed to be helpful and fun rather than personally threatening and stressful. How to get the right balance was a central question for us. The students needed to feel an atmosphere of trust if they were not to become defensive about the feedback they are given. This involved our listening in an accepting way. However, we did not wish to reinforce prejudices or miss opportunities to highlight the operation of gender inequalities. Just as the program was ending the students reached the stage of being comfortable with the group looking at each other's tapes. This was very useful as it allowed an analysis of what is happening, and for rerunning the tapes to decide if an intervention was well timed, could have been handled differently and so on. This gets past the habit students have of saying "I tried it and it doesn't work" for clearly it works for some of the people some of the time.

Journal keeping was important in giving the students a chance to state her or his own perceptions, to give the inner voice expression. The interplay of the inner intention as expressed in the journal and the outer view as recorded by the camera, proved to be a much richer source of information gathering and personal change than did the more conventional research approaches of questionnaires, quantitative analysis and so on. The problem is to help people "see" what is happening, how patriarchal values are manifested in the minutae of the momentary interactions of the group. The problem is to show the dynamics of inequality to people who are inside rather than outside the patriarchal tradition. The problem is not just that of the personal defenses of participants. We found that even the camera operator focussed on the boys, who were deemed to be doing something interesting, the centre of the action. Girls are more apparent as bystanders, observers to the action. If they do take the foreground they tend to be filmed in static close up shots for their beauty.

In the *Afters* program, the facilitators often commented on the advantage of working in pairs. This enabled them to share their thoughts and to reflect together on the progress of the group. A number of them chose to

monitor each other's interactions with the children as a way of exploring the group dynamics. By providing each other with support and understanding, they were better able to grapple with difficult and complex issues and together were more willing to take risks in trying out new ideas. This cooperative approach was integral to the Afters program and enables adults to share their reflections. Through the use of the videotapes that they were able to monitor themselves, to check if what they were actually doing matched their intentions, and to reflect upon their actions.

I would now like to describe an excerpt from *Afters: Gender and Conflict in After School Care.* In this scene Doris has set Rose and Jemima a problem; there are two puppets in the play but only one ruler. Rose and Jemima explore a number of different ways of dealing with the conflict that has been posed. For many of us conflict is perceived as a negative force, this means that we rarely deal with it effectively. Those less effective, more common methods of dealing with conflict are acted out by Rose and Jemima in the spontaneous puppet production. They offer various solutions to the problem of the ruler:

Cut the ruler in half.....COMPROMISE
Sooky baby.....INSULT
Hitting.....PHYSICAL VIOLENCE
Boo Hoo.....CRYING
I'll do a suicide....THREAT
Goodbye.....WITHDRAWAL, AVOIDANCE
As Rose pops up on the other side.....TRYING ANOTHER ANGLE
Come on sucker make my day.....IMITATING TELEVISION
Sorry.....APOLOGY
And finally taking turns.....SHARING

Doris shows great patience, asking the children, "does that solve the problem?" until finally they arrive at a just and effective solution. The tape shows how young children are capable of generating a variety of creative responses to conflict and making informed judgements about the efficacy of different solutions. That is, it supports the idea that young children have the cognitive ability to learn conflict resolution techniques. The tape also illustrates how children incorporate aggressive scripts from popular culture: The implied revenge shooting "come on sucker, make my day" and two threats of suicide. This is a timely reminder that there are many influences on a child's thinking. Television, videos, rock clips, and other popular media present a particular view of conflict and problem-solving which runs counter to the ethic of nonviolence.' They build a notion of

masculinity that is based on aggression, violence and "power over". It will help to restrict the amount of violent television watched by young children and research has shown that talking through a program with adults modifies the impact of the violent portrayal of relationships on the children.

Conclusion

Teaching nonviolent conflict resolution to children is a worthwhile and important task. Violence is an expensive option and even very young children can learn more effective strategies for dealing with conflict. Programs such as *Dealing with Conflict* and *Afters* help adults to get started on teaching conflict resolution to groups of children, be it in school, after school care or other settings. However, the representation of aggression and violence in popular culture as natural and desirable masculine behaviour serves to undermine the endeavour. Also, adults cannot reasonably expect children, its least powerful members, to undertake the heavy burden of redressing the structural inequalities in society. That is, political action for wider social change needs to go hand in hand with the implementation of conflict resolution programs. Nor can adults see teaching conflict resolution as a one way street. To engage with this task is to hold up one's own gendered behaviour to scrutiny. As Sandra says on the videotape, the understanding and skills fundamental to the *Afters* program are "really a life-long process". Nonviolence is not just a set of conflict resolution tactics: it is a different way of relating to others and being in the world.

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"Peace Education Miniprints" are published and distributed by the R&D Group "Preparedness for Peace" (address: School of Education, Box 23501, S-200 45 Malmö, Sweden).

ISSN 1101-6418